

Canadian Olympic Coach Fires Up Local Skaters

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Winter dreams in Singapore are possible

It's a wonder the ice didn't melt. Olympic Coach Doug Leigh lit a fire under Singapore's competitive figure skaters last month during the second annual Olympic Dream Seminar, organized by Singapore Ice Skating Association (SISA). "If you're not prepared to do what it takes to be No. 1, you're not going to get anywhere," he said emphatically. "It's easy to blame 'the system' as the reason you're not getting where you want to go. You have to be bigger than that."

Mr. Leigh's words carried a lot of resonance with the Singaporean kids who struggle with a demanding education system and limited training conditions. However, the 55-year-old coach from Skate Canada is known for his zeal and motivational skills with athletes almost as much as he is for his technical knowledge. Skaters and coaches from across the globe, including a handful from Singapore, have traveled for training to his Mariposa School of Skating near Toronto. His voice crackling with electricity, Mr. Leigh added: "You have to find a way to do your job—and then do it."

As a coach, Mr. Leigh has been doing his job well for a long time. His athletes have won a total of 17 World and Olympic medals. He has been to 25 consecutive World Championships and 6 Winter Olympic Games. He has a Level 4 rating from the National Coaching Certification Program, which could be described as the Canadian cousin to Singapore's National Coaching Accreditation Program. He was

joined on the seminar this year by his wife Michelle, who also is an Olympic coach with a Level 4 rating.

Their gung ho enthusiasm for the sport proved irresistible for the 23 skaters and five coaches from Singapore—and for a 12-year-old who drove in with her family from Malaysia to attend the seminar. Closer to home, 10-year-old Tabitha Lin, who belongs to the All Stars Figure Skating Club, described the seminar as one of the best experiences she has had on ice. "It was challenging, and it was fun," she said. Even with the group lesson format, she got some valuable advice on her axel and double salchow jumps. "I also learned new ways to enter and exit my spins."

Hosting the seminar wasn't easy for SISA. Expenses such as renting the ice, air fares for coaches and accommodation quickly add up. The total cost of the seminar was an estimated \$35,000. As a small "other" national sports association with limited public funding, SISA is yet another example of Singapore's new determination in sports to "get the job done". The Association raised about \$15,000 through its Olympic Dream Lucky Draw earlier this year to help pay for the seminar. SISA received about \$15,000 in funding through the Singapore Sports Council, says SISA vice president Sonja Chong. SISA also has applied for support from the Singapore National Olympic Council via its Olympic Solidarity fund, thanks to ice skating's status as a winter Olympic sport—indeed, as Singapore's only official winter Olympic sport.

Ironically, the skaters are in an Olympic sport without a local Olympic facility. "The system (in Singapore) has served the skaters so far," said Mr. Leigh. "But the rink is not an international standard, and that's a big problem." Without an Olympic size rink, the skaters will never get to the next competitive level. Nor will Singapore gain membership in the International Skating Union, confirms Mr. Leigh.

"All of us know that in the next couple of years, we're going to see more Asians on the world podiums," he says. The issue for Singapore, then, is whether it wants its skating athletes in the picture. To Mr. Leigh's thinking, there are some straightforward questions to be considered: "Are we giving kids an equal opportunity in sports? Are the people in power, the people with the finances, going to lend a hand?"

Perhaps, he adds quietly, the casinos could build the rink. "They usually have lots of money."

While the powers that be ponder the merits and difficulties of building an international rink in Singapore, the skaters persevere with the circumstances they have in hand. Over four days at Fuji Ice Palace, the ice skaters spent more than 20 hours working with the Leighs. While they worked primarily on ice, the coaches also had an off-ice jump class where they practiced jumping technique in front of a ballet mirror. There also was a lecture on skating,